

Poor locked out by GOP House

By Cindy Richards
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Webster's defines compassionate as 1) sympathetic and 2) granted to an individual because of an emergency or other unusual circumstances: compassionate military leave.

I looked it up to make sure I understood the meaning. Because compassion is not what I see when I look at the government run by people who call themselves compassionate conservatives.

Here we are, 18 months into this compassionate conservatism, and already we have taken over one sovereign country. Now, we are turning our compassion on Americans.

If you happen to be a parent who is fortunate enough to have a job that pays decent wages, you'll be benefitting soon from the compassion bestowed by the conservatives in Washington. It will come in the form of a \$400-per-child check, to be delivered to a mailbox near you.

If, however, you happen to be a parent who toils long hours for poverty-level wages, forget it. No compassion--and no check--for you.

Those low-income families have taxes withheld from their meager checks, but they make so little that they generally get most of the money back in a tax refund the following year. According to Republicans, the fact that these families--250,000 of whom are military families--have no tax liability means they shouldn't benefit from the family-friendliest portion of the \$350 billion tax cut passed by Congress last month. That bit, which raises the per-child tax credit from \$600 to \$1,000, will give tax-paying families an additional \$400 per kid, provided those families already make more than \$26,625.

"If we don't act on it this week before vacation, then checks don't go out to the families of 12 million children," said Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.). "This is just a classic example of the kinds of choices the Republicans have been making."

To be fair, it's the House Republicans making the choice. Senate Republicans were shamed into passing a bill on June 5 that would extend the tax credit to low-income working families at a cost of \$35 billion.

But House Republicans seem to have no shame. They said poor folks could get the cash only if there were even more benefits for the wealthy. Their version of the bill would cost \$80 billion.

The two versions headed to conference committee. There they sit. If Congress fails to act before heading home for its July 4 break, the neediest among us will be left out when the federal government starts sending checks.

Ironically, these checks are supposed to be part of Washington's effort to jump-start the economy. Proponents argued that giving the majority of that \$350 billion to the wealthiest folks in the form of a cut on dividend taxes would be the fastest way to get things going again. The idea, of course, is that really rich folks will take their windfall and plow it back into the economy to create even more jobs.

Maybe they will, and maybe they won't. But send a couple hundred bucks--a week's worth of wages--to the families who toil at the other end of the economic spectrum and watch them spend. New clothes for their kids, new tires for the car, a little more food in the pantry.

Do I think it's a good idea to give anyone a tax cut when the country already has a \$4 trillion debt? No. But if we're going to give it to folks who don't need it, how we can leave out the folks who really could use the cash?

If you don't believe me, then listen to Warren Buffett, head of Berkshire Hathaway:

"Proponents of cutting tax rates on dividends argue that the move will stimulate the economy," the self-made gazillionaire wrote in the Washington Post after Congress approved the economic stimulus plan that could give him a \$310 million windfall. "Putting \$1,000 in the pockets of 310,000 families with urgent needs is going to provide far more stimulus to the economy than putting the same \$310 million in my pockets."